Common Ground

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Introduction

Through large-scale oil paintings my research engulfs the viewer in an environment consisting of only animals. Absent of romanticized landscapes, my paintings render the animal form in a balance between the refined and unrefined. This represents the fracturing of animal populations and the surreal and sometimes isolated environments animals are forced to navigate during the Anthropocene, or the geological age dominated by human activity. The Anthropocene is continually moving towards human-centric ideologies. These ideologies manifest in Speciesist perceptions. Speciesism and anthropocentrism represent a bias that certain species, particularly humans, are superior to other life forms. They represent humankind's ignorance to recognize any likeness we share with animals. I believe by exploring the common themes of all life such as, reproduction, migration, and survival, and shared environment we can start to question and ultimately dissolve the human focused hierarchy and coexist with all living creatures in symbiosis.

Ancient Animals

Some of the very first human-made images were of animals carved and painted onto the walls of caves, as seen in Lascaux, France. The Lascaux caves depict some of the earliest and most well-preserved cave paintings. The Lascaux cave paintings largely depicted wildlife, a testament to the intimate relationship between human and animal. The survival of humans and animals were so interconnected that early hominids decided that animals were worthy to be the first art subjects. A recent study even revealed that ancient people illustrated the gait of animals more accurately than modern artists (Stromberg 1). This

intrinsic knowledge our ancestors possessed of animals was rooted in observation as a means of survival. My work embraces this ancient tradition of animal observation in several manners. The images I produce are a study of not only their anatomy, but also of their nature and the nuances of their existence. My paintings are displayed in a way to encompass the viewer. Utilizing life-size scale and false walls the viewer is entirely surrounded by the animal form, similar to how our ancestors interacted with animal life and depicted them in their living spaces. Until modern human history we have had to coexist, sharing the earth and its bounty. These shared environments created a bond which has since been degraded and nearly eliminated. The Anthropocene has seen drastic environmental changes, to the extent that some environmentalists argue true, unaltered nature no longer exists. The environmentalist, Bill McKibben, addresses this in his book *The End of Nature*. "We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial."(McKibben 58). This sobering fact reveals the severity that modern society has severed our connection with the natural world. We have altered the world to the point that nature and humans are no longer considered compatible. We now have to face ourselves and ask whether or not there is a place for nature and animals in our future.

Personal History

While growing up I found myself as part of a society that existed far beyond the reaches of true nature. Born and raised in a safe suburb in Littleton, Colorado, my interactions with animals were curated. Only when my parents ventured out into the Rocky

Mountains did I see wildlife. Even during our excursions into the plains, foothills, and mountains I was subconsciously creating divisions in my mind between animals and myself. In my mind they were among the trees and rocks, and I was between ranch style homes and manicured lawns. As far as I knew these lines were rigid and were not to be crossed. Despite this, I developed a kinship with animals; wildlife felt familiar and all too often more relatable than the neighborhood children. Thoroughly convinced I was a deer, I took every chance possible to brag about my conceived identity. Fortunately, this delusion eventually faded away leaving a seed that grew into deep love and insatiable curiosity for wildlife. Without the opportunity for genuine interactions with animals I turned to mimicry. Art and animal encyclopedias were my source to connect with what I loved. As my life progressed, urban wildlife began to encroach onto the pristine lawns in my surrounding neighborhood. My own family witnessed this shift. My father and great-grandfather worked on the last farm in Littleton, Colorado. They watched as their world transformed from a mix of wilderness and farmland into suburbs and shopping malls. The rapid expansion of human development into the prairies and mountains of Colorado forced wildlife to explore new niches in the suburbs. Animals frequently deemed as nuisance animals are typically the first to adapt to new human-made niches. Coyotes and foxes would leave their tracks in the snow and yelp in the night. Raccoons would vandalize our backyard gardens.

One day a young mule deer buck lay on the hill in my backyard. His presence seemed different. He was more wild and aware, almost a mix between the urban wildlife and the "true" wild I had learned of. In my mind the infiltration of deer into Littleton signified a melding of human and animal. I saw us all as the same, the young buck belonged here as

much as I did, if not more so. The land I grew up on was once wild and open. Plowed and constructed it changed but he remained. Now we shared a habitat and he deserved this space. That young mule deer was raised and matured in Littleton, Colorado the same as me. He moved throughout our fenceless backyards, grazing: while I moved through our backyards playing hide and seek with my siblings. Where once there were tame squirrels, deer now existed, the embodiment of wild nature. Eventually dispersal predators even found themselves in our neighborhood. Everything from black bears to mountain lions accidentally found themselves roaming around the suburbs of Littleton. The infiltration of "true" wild in my suburban yard yielded a significant juxtaposition. We were no longer separate, despite the city and government's attempts to eliminate animal life from our safe, segregated spaces. Animal life persisted and overcame to thrive next to our traffic lights, railroads, and neighborhoods. The animals that I saw living near me were the first subjects I chose to depict. Similar to our ancient ancestors I decided to paint those animals that I knew, saw, and that captivated me.

Speciesism

The encounters I experienced with the resilient wildlife of Littleton were ones that I would not soon forget. My obvious affection for animals is undeniable, but the gazes that I have shared with animals throughout my life are all reflective of every human-animal encounter. It is a reflection of survival and instinct. In his essay, *Why Look at Animals?,* John Berger, an art critic confronts the dilemma of human-animal relationships in art.

> "Animals are born, are sentient and are mortal. In these things they resemble man. In their superficial anatomy- less in their deep anatomy- in their habits, in their time in their physical capacities they differ from man. They are both like and unlike" (Berger 4)

We are confronted with moral questions of how our pets differ from the countless animals we utilize for our own purposes. The pig versus the dog is a classic example of this. It is uncomfortable to be confronted with the reality that these animals share a similar capacity for consciousness. Both species are incredibly clever, it is even argued that pigs are more intelligent in certain aspects than the average canine.

> "Pigs have even been trained to play video games... Pigs even outperformed dogs in this task. Manipulation of a joystick to acquire a target indicates the beginnings of a complex capacity known as self-agency, the ability to recognize actions caused by oneself versus those controlled by someone else. Chimpanzees and monkeys are also good at performing similar tasks." (Colvin 1)

Delving into such moral debates like which animal or species deserves our attention, rescuing, or preserving requires revision of our own personal ethics. The simplest answer is that the majority of the American population does not have honest interactions with pigs. Societal structures purpose the pig for consumption, while subjugates the canine for companionship. This mindset shows the effects of speciesism. Speciesism is the "discrimination in favor of one species, usually the human species, over another, especially in the exploitation or mistreatment of animals by humans" (dictionary.com). Humans harnessing the ability to prioritize and facilitate the livelihood of certain species above others

reflects the human-centric society active today. We, as humans, believe we hold the power to define the purpose of another sentient, non-human life.

The "Others"

We often categorize other living beings together to better understand our own place in the social hierarchy. Those who differ from us are placed into the "other" category. Animals have long been considered the "other" and ultimately lesser in comparison to human life particularly in Western societies. The term "anthropocentrism" is used to describe the belief that humans are superior to other life forms. It is easy to differentiate ourselves from animal life, mainly due to physical anatomical variations. We see an animal's value in the form of monetary gain and overwhelmingly fail to recognize our shared likenesses in our desire to survive. This is exhibited specifically in American capitalism. To increase more food, eggs, furs, and dairy many animals are crowded into in factory farms. These industries are a few of the examples of the exploitation of animal life. Our human-centric world view has created opportunities to oppress and brutalize instead of express compassion and kinship. We view animal life in narrow capacities. They are food, pets, trophies, entertainment, or labor.

Society values animals that display more human-like traits as superior. A few of these animals include apes, elephants, and dolphins. Even these "special" animals, that we relate closely to, are subjected to testing, labor, and entertainment purposes. They are no more than what they provide to our selfish species. We value what animals produce, such as meat, eggs, and dairy, above the value of their lives. Animals have even been observed expressing similar emotions to our own. Such as elephants grieving their dead, but yet they are still

poached for their tusks. Humpback whales have been observed rescuing seals from killer whales. This appears to show whales exhibiting a sense of justice and compassion to an animal outside of their own species. While whaling is perceived in Western societies as antiquated it is still practiced to obtain their meat and even capture them to become displays in aquariums. Yet there is immense resistance that prevents change to our static society. If we recognize the consciousness of the animal and respect their lives in the same manner as our own, our current treatment towards them becomes appalling. We are ultimately slaughtering, skinning, and torturing ourselves. National Geographic and Photo Ark creator Joel Sartore astutely states "when we save species, we're actually saving ourselves". The Photo Ark is a project that has depicted over eight thousand animals to date to bring a face to earth's biodiversity. What is there to lose if we express compassion for another species? My work aims to confront these difficult and ever urgent ethical questions, primarily why we participate in an anthropocentric hierarchy, to eventually inspire curiosity and admiration for what we currently view as the "other".

The Dangers of Anthropomorphizing

My art aims to reveal the similarities and differences between human and animal life. In order to eliminate speciesism, it is important to celebrate biodiversity. Understanding our differences allows us to live in symbiosis. When we force human perceptions on animals, or anthropomorphize them, a plethora of issues arise. Many traditional wildlife artists exotify, romanticize, or anthropomorphize animals. All of these forms of depiction are detrimental to animal life. Without genuine representation we become oblivious to the reality and dangers

facing animals. Exoticism of wildlife can be seen in the illegal wildlife trade. Consumers demand animals as pets or trophies to elevate the societal status. Other times well-meaning individuals will bring wildlife into their homes to "help" them. Both of these actions strip the animals of their individuality and autonomy. An archetypal example of this is the kidnapping of deer fawns. Deer instinctively hide their young while they forage. Many people who happen upon fawns will assume that they are abandoned when in reality their mother is nearby. These "rescued" fawns often die or are euthanized. At best a wildlife rehabilitator must raise the fawns, a cheap substitute for their real mother. This same type narrative continues to play out with native and exotic wildlife and ill-prepared individuals bringing animals into their homes. We expect animals to want the same things that we search for in life when in reality their needs and desires differ immensely.

Being ignorant of the diverse needs of animal life leads to detrimental, at best, and more commonly, fatal consequences. Often animals in these domestic situations are expected to adhere to social and cultural morality. There is the morbid case of "Murderous Mary" the elephant (all-that-is-interesting.com). An Asian elephant, previously called Big Mary, was part of a circus act and an accident left her owner dead. The people of the town decided the elephant was guilty of murder. A conviction reminiscent of the "eye for an eye" Code of Hammurabi, lead to Big Mary being hung by the neck with the aid of a crane. While this punishment might have been just and serving as a deterrent in human standards, it was a primitive and absurd solution as retribution to the death of a trainer. Weighing an elephant on the scales of lady justice in lieu of the laws of nature is illogical.

Many modern organizations try to inspire compassion by overly anthropomorphizing animals. I believe that this is a dangerous and slippery path that lacks proper respect. Bears are an animal that is particularly subjected to anthropomorphization. Many people believe them to be similar to the teddy bears and popular culture's renditions of bears. In late summer 2015 in Waterton Canyon, Colorado, hikers attempted to take selfies with bears. Since fall was nearing bears were gaining weight in preparation for hibernation. This coupled with the fact that there were a couple of bear sows with cubs was a recipe for disaster. This trend resulted in the closing of the park for the remainder of the season to prevent injuries to both humans and bears. This measure luckily prevented any dangerous encounters with bears. A more extreme example of anthropomorphizing bears is Timothy Treadwell, who is now known for his extremist approach to conservation and his subsequent tragic end. Treadwell lived among and photographed Alaskan brown bears for thirteen summers and considered himself as the bears' protector. His growing comfort with the large apex predators led him to believe they had a mutual, peaceful relationship. Eventually to harsh reality of brown bear's nature revealed itself to him and his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard. On October 6, 2003 Treadwell and his girlfriend's scavenged remains were found (Grizzly Man). An old male brown bear had killed and consumed the couple.

> "Tim's foolish disregard for his own safety, and overconfidence dealing with bears in the past, luck really, not to mention his mistake of placing anthropomorphic values on bears, and disregarding established federal guidelines when photographing and camping with brown bears contributed to both Tim and Amie's death. Grizzly bears

> are wild animals and should always be treated as such, wild and unpredictable. Not a pet, or lovable cuddly bear." (yellowstone-bearman.com)

While the loss of life is undeniably tragic, this instance serves as a clear warning about respecting the nature of animals. Brown bears are commonly known to kill one another, especially cubs, so believing that they would not retain the same nature when interacting with humans is naive. The bear that killed Treadwell and Huguenard was shot, something that Treadwell's life was dedicated to preventing. As good as the intention to live among and protect the bears was, the entire incident destroyed not only three lives, but also hurt conservation efforts by enforcing the demonization of bears.

These stories often end fatally for either party and sometimes both, demonstrating how accurate and genuine depictions of animals is vital for us to understand one another. Ultimately, bestowing human morality on animals only furthers an already great division. The combination of both respect and compassion is absolutely vital to understanding other forms of life. My art depicts animals in a manner that does not reject their genuine nature. They are not exaggerated or modified to be a reflection of the human experience. They are instead meant to be a reflection of the animal itself and its own significant autonomy.

Shared Experiences

When we look past the divisionary views speciesism creates, it is easy to find strong parallels between ourselves and other animals. As living beings trying to navigate harsh habitats, we all strive to survive. Survival itself includes including maturation, reproduction, migration, seeking nourishment and shelter. While the

needs of each species varies in the way they all address these challenges of life, a common thread is the desire to stay alive. Humans follow these same rules and we can see them reflected in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow, a psychologist, theorized in *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943) that humans have a hierarchy of needs that lead to happiness (Burton 1). At the base of this hierarchy are things necessary for survival such as food, water, and shelter. The higher tiers consist of esteem and self-actualization. Our basic needs are sometimes referred to as instinctive or animalistic. All living organisms unquestionably have needs that are necessary for survival. In these base necessities we are all united. I believe that this unity extends far past our basic desire to survive and into consciousness. Animals have recently been studied and proven to exhibit happiness. Rats change their facial expressions in response to pleasant stimuli. The rats will prick their ears up, which is likened to a human smiling (news.nationalgeographic.com). Since we have little to no ability to decipher and quantify the consciousness of another living being we are also incapable of understanding what defines their quality of life. My art argues that we are far more similar in our habits and sentience than we currently recognize and are divided by trivial speciesist borders. To start transcending the borders dividing us it is important to create a common ground.

Animal Autonomy

To create a common ground, a connection needs to be established and the focus needs to remain on the animal. In my paintings, the wildlife is rendered isolated

and in an expressive manner that is true to the species' anatomy. The animals in my paintings always appear without a distinctive landscape, which differs from traditional, romanticized wildlife imagery. Removing the animal from its natural, idealized domain was a choice I made early on to represent the degradation of habitats that wildlife are increasingly being forced to navigate. Minimizing the background also becomes a tool to emphasize the animal's significance. Standing alone, the animals are seen less as isolated and more as worthy of attention. Our Anthropocene age is unsurprisingly focused on human needs and superiority. By depicting the animal alone I challenge the values of our anthropocentric hierarchy. I believe the animal is significant and powerful enough to stand on its own. To further reject ideas that have landed us in the Anthropocene I make a point to never depict the human form in any fashion. When the human form is present in a work of art viewers will typically relate more intimately and immediately with a form that mirrors their own. Sue Coe elaborates this sentiment when being interviewed by Giovanni Aloi for *Antennae*.

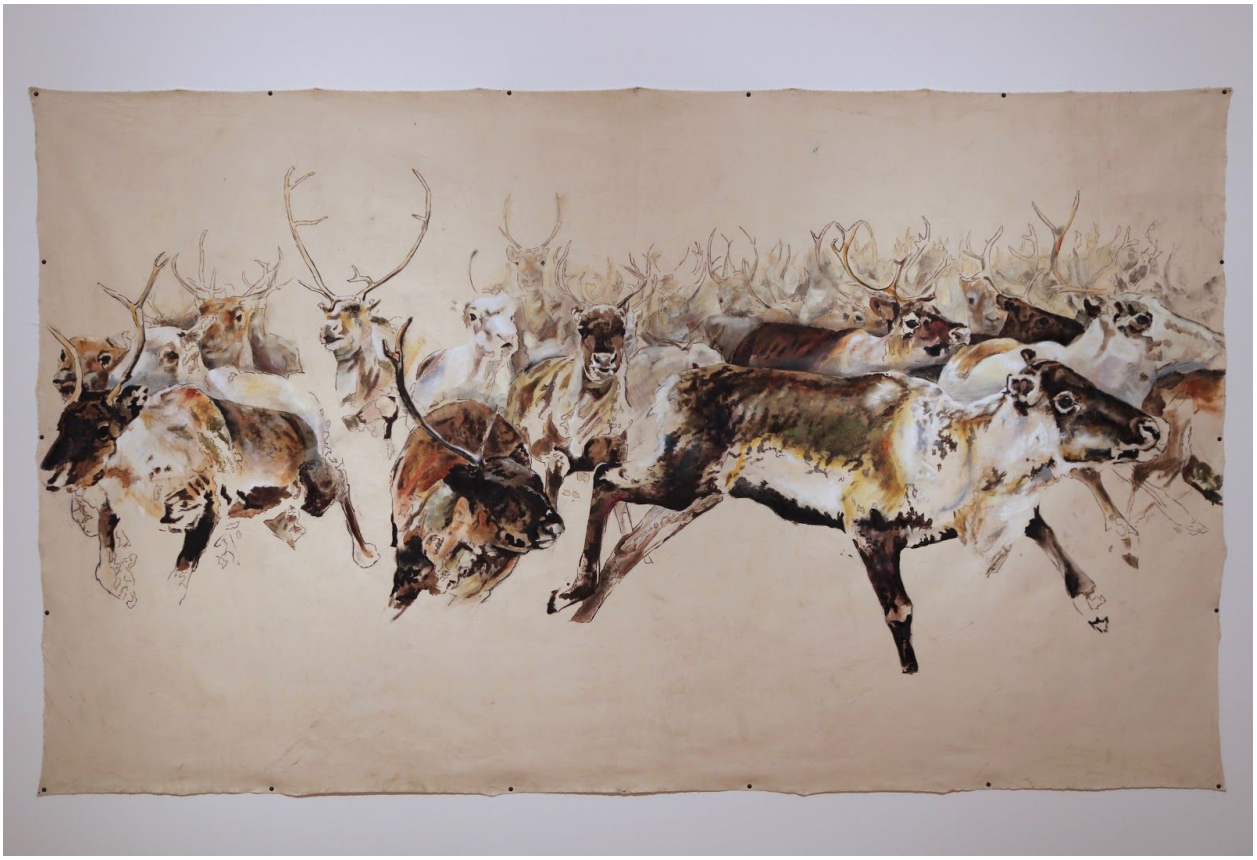
> "It's a strange thing, but human beings, even those who are aware still want to see themselves as the center of attention in a painting holding the viewers gaze. It's an uphill fight to make non-human animals the star of their own reality that have their own emotions and own lives. We always look to ourselves for the reaction shot, and never leave breathing room for any other creatures." (Aloi 31)

Sue Coe's work revolves around animal rights and welfare. Often her imagery depicts brutally honest depictions of animals that are used in the food imagery. Coe's work is an argument that animals are as deserving of living life as humans. Therefore, the lone animal is a statement for its autonomy and value as an individual while simultaneously being an invitation for the audience to interact. The interaction with solely the animal form allows the audience to see the animal stripped of human projections. When placing the animal imagery in a gallery space, we typically assume it represents a metaphor for the human condition. The intention of my art is not to entirely dismiss this notion, as it is important to recognize our similarities. However, it is my intention for the focus to be on the animal and the intricacies they possess, and how society's habits are detrimental to their lives. Areas within my paintings embrace unfinished qualities, an aesthetic decision meant to represent the fracturing seen in wild populations due to habitat loss, exploitation, and apathy. The life-size scale of my animal paintings aim to inspire a sense of humility and awe in the viewer while retaining a sense of realism. When approaching the images the viewer is confronted with the reality of the animal. The scale is not minimized but replicated to imitate the presence of the animal. The paintings are displayed at the average human eye level to create a line of eye contact between the painted animal and the viewer. Eye contact is a vital aspect of human communication, so eye contact with the image is necessary to bridge the communication gap with humans. This experience is something I confronted when sharing the gaze of the mule deer in my backyard. This

shared gaze is replicated continuously whenever human eyes meet animal eyes and I use it as a tool to further cement the interactions between human and animal.

Social Caribou

Eye contact and other forms of body language are vital for obtaining communication and setting up social structures. Social structures are vital to many species, including humans. Caribou are an incredibly social species that is reliant on the structure of a herd. Caribou herd numbers can reach up to half a million individuals (arkive.org). These unique mammals have the longest migration of any land animal. Since movement and a social herd system is so integral to the species' survival I wanted my painting to reflect these aspects in my painting, *Migration*. As humans, our social systems are vital to our own species' success. With our own populations soaring, movement within a large group is not a unique situation for many people. The parallels between our species are apparent. The tremendous movement of the caribou herd is emphasized in my work by utilizing scale. The entirety of the herd is captured in a massive six foot by eleven foot canvas with oil paint. The painting captures the chaos and density of herd movement. In this panel the animals are at their most confrontational with the viewer as they are stampeding towards the viewer. The focal point of the piece is the split in the herd. The middle of the painting depicts the stampeding herd splitting and shifting their direction to the left and right. The herd thins out the further from the middle the viewer looks. In this moment of chaos, the group mentality humans exhibit themselves is reflected in the similar motion of animals.



Migration
Oil on Canvas
71” x 128”
2017-2018

Canvas

The core of our interactions with our environment emanate from the receptors in our skin. Skin creates a barrier between our bodies and the world. It holds the unique property of both connecting us to and isolating us from our surroundings. It is also a trait we share with non-human animals. It is because of this sentiment that I choose raw canvas to paint on. Painting on a surface that references skin is symbolic of the human-animal shared experience. Humans and animals may differ in many

anatomical ways, but we all have the physical sensation of touch. We all feel our surroundings and react to our environment from this information. Oleg Kulik, a performance artist, photographer, and videographer, pushes post-humanist theories in his work. Kulik uses glass to display similarities between human and animal nature in his series of photographs *Transparency*; "Glass becomes the liminal surface upon which the two incompatible dimensions of nature and culture can now overlap." (Aloi 71). In this series Kulik photographs museum animal dioramas with the overlaying ghostly, glass reflections of humans fornicating. Fornication is often considered animalistic and instinctual. This act itself is one of the closest ways we relate to animals. While my work does not focus on the act of reproduction like Oleg Kulik's, I believe forcing two seemingly incongruent worlds together also forces contemplation on where these worlds converge. The natural warmth of the cotton canvas also creates a warmer and more inviting plane when compared to the coldness of the traditional white gessoed canvas. The warm canvas creates a ground that is similar to two worlds, similar to Kulik's use of glass to combine human and animal. These qualities combined help keep the animal as the main focus of the painting while still embracing an inviting image. The majority of my paintings have contrasted the animal imagery with a stark flat background surface. This has created images that while focused on the animal, seem to push them into a place of intense isolation, paralleling the environmental conditions we have imposed on their ever-shrinking wild habitats. In an effort to further develop these considerations I began trying to dye the canvases to create a more atmospheric and suggestive tone. I wanted to retain the

natural qualities of the cotton canvas and the warm, minimal aspects I was using in my paintings while still hinting at natural environments.

My process drastically shifted after observing the staining fall leaves left on the pavement of my apartment complex. Inquisitive of the staining abilities of natural materials, such as leaves and sediment, I began experimenting by layering leaves over raw canvas. Utilizing organic matter such as plant matter and sediments as dyes is a tradition that dates back to the very first image making processes. The pigments in paint are often derived from natural resources. The Cochineal insect is still used to create red dyes (historyofnaturalartpigments.weebly.com). With this in mind I decided to utilize the raw materials in my own backyard, while also being conscious and careful not to harm living animals inhabiting the area. Burying my canvases under decaying leaves, dirt, and other organic matter and leaving them to weather over the course of several weeks created natural and abstracted staining. This stained canvas becomes a more natural and atmospheric plane to paint and react to. This became a collaboration between myself and natural elements. The patterning on the animals themselves reflects the patterning of the stains this allows the animals to meld more cohesively with the background. This process relinquishes some of the control I previously had on the pieces and introduces nature itself into the paintings. While left buried, the canvases are subjected to weather patterns including rain, ice, and snow. These distressed canvases depict the environment that humans, animals, and natural forces simultaneously interact with. In that way they are tied closer to animal that is represented in oil paint on the canvas. The paintings still retain the

same qualities I valued with the blank and unaltered canvas backgrounds, such as focusing on the animal form, while still creating an atmosphere that connects to a natural landscape thus drawing a deeper connection between nature, imagery, and audience. By collaborating and ultimately submitting to the will of nature the canvases create a literal common ground between human, animal, and artistic interaction.

Blacktail Deer

The first painting I approached with the new stained canvas background was *Columbian Blacktail Deer*. The image depicts a Columbian blacktail doe and her two fawns. Columbian blacktail deer are a subspecies of mule deer. Deer as a species are incredibly reliant on their senses and attune to changes within their habitats, which has in turn allows them to adapt to a large variety of environments. Mule deer in general have not benefited from the expansion of human populations as widely as whitetail deer have. Hunting and high fawn mortality rates have hurt some of their populations. Despite this, mule deer have begun their own expansion back into human dominated landscapes, such as cities and suburbs. Watching these massive animals silently navigate urbanized spaces is a surreal experience and demonstrates the unique ability of the deer. These mammals hold almost a mythical quality in their ability to appear and disappear from our sight within the blink of an eye. Does even hide their young fawns within plain sight while remaining undetected. In my painting, *Columbian Blacktail Deer,* I wanted to emphasize the deer's adaptability. Utilizing

the pattern of the naturally aged canvas, the image of the doe and her fawns almost melt back into the canvas. The pattern of the leaves and dirt that have stained the canvas is repeated in the fur and patterning of the deer. Emphasizing their camouflage in turn emphasizes the elusive quality of the animal themselves.

Columbian Blacktail Deer
Oil on Distressed Canvas
71” x 160”
2018

Adaptable Art

Through my art I seek to communicate a meaningful experience between the audience and the animal. My series of animal paintings are flexible and adaptable enough to exist in a variety of spaces. This malleability is a reflection of the adaptability of the subject matter portrayed in the paintings. As we are seeing animals being dispersed from their natural environments and inhabiting increasingly urban

and suburban environments, I feel it is appropriate for my work to retain that same ability. In traditional pristine gallery spaces the animal's purpose is to shift into a more confrontational and displaced role. The cold white walls of some galleries are intended to strip the context from an art object so it can be viewed entirely isolated. For my paintings this can reflect the displacement of nature during the Anthropocene. Historically, images containing animal imagery were regarded as lesser and insignificant compared to imagery of humans. Ekins, an art historian and critic, describes this anthropocentric attitude in his book *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*. "Baroque academic theorists also rated paintings by genre. The so-called 'hierarchy of the genres' determined which subjects were worthy of serious attention. One hierarchy reads, from lowest to highest: Still life, landscape, animals, portraits, histories" (Ekins 22). This sentiment is still prevalent in modern thinking and ultimately leads to a lack of animal images in high art spaces. Most fine art in museum consists of human imagery or imagery reflecting the human experience. The life and existence of the animal is largely absent. This underlying line of thought reflects the human-centric hierarchy in which our current society exists. It leaves the impression that the animal is not important enough to belong in high art. The animal in a clean, white space is sometimes interpreted as dirty and savage, an aspect of perception I hope to erase with my own art. By bringing the animal into these "human" spaces, they become more political and confrontational. They intend to take a stance against misconceptions and outdated speciesist beliefs about non-human life forms. The use of an animal in a gallery is by no means a new or groundbreaking

concept. The artist Joseph Beuys' performance piece *I Like America and America Likes Me* brought a live coyote into the gallery. "He (Beuys) again asserted his own liminal status by closely associating himself with two of the world's most hunted and despised animals" (Eisenman 238). Despite the fact that animals in a pristine gallery space is not a new concept, the message remains significant during this age of mass extinction and environmental destruction.

Urban Wildlife

Urban wildlife is becoming ever more present in our own backyards. These species have adapted and reclaimed part of their former habitats. Since these animals occupy a niche in ever growing human made landscapes, they are often familiar to people. This familiarity allows them to be more relatable and relevant to my audience. My paintings depict wild animals that people encounter frequently to question the impact we have on animals. While many of my paintings are of deer, due to my personal bias, deer are similar to other wild animals capable of inhabiting both wild and man-made environments. These wild animals walk the line between nature and ourselves, we can see that they are both like and unlike us all in one glance. These particular animals provide the best opportunity to start bridging the perceived gap between ourselves and nature. By showing compassion to the animals stumbling into our groomed environments we give ourselves a chance in treating animal life and even our fellow humans with greater respect.

Irrepressible Coyote

One animal that has done particularly well at adapting to the rapidly growing urban environments is the coyote. Being one of the most persecuted animals in North America their success resides in their unique reproductive habits and incredible adaptability. When endemic coyotes are killed off, the remaining females will go into heat more often and will produce significantly larger litters. This allows them to keep stable populations despite consistent and brutal hunting and trapping. Their irrepressible nature is relatable to human populations. The coyote population is actually benefiting from human environments as it has opened a new niche for food. Despite the genetic similarities to the pets we keep in our homes, there is a distinct barrier our society embraces by labeling these animals as pests. Like most canine species, coyotes have social systems and even exist in packs. This social element and longer term parental care ties us together as mammals. It begs the question, Why do we view them as lesser? These are the ideas I want to be reflected in *Coyote Rebound*. This painting depicts a mother coyote with five young pups. Three of the pups are next to her while the final two are lagging behind trying to catch up to the group. The two straggling pups represent the larger litter size that appear after culling is executed. In "The Animal Dialogues" Craig Childs states, "Field biologists have estimated that if three-quarters of the world's coyote population were destroyed at once, within a year or two their numbers would return unfazed" (38). One of my points in this painting is to create empathy by painting young pups, reminiscent of the puppies in our houses. The painting gives an innocent and endearing face to the massive and expensive operations of killing off nuisance species.

Coyote Rebound
Oil on Canvas
71” x 158”
2017

Communication

When we attempt to relate to animals, one of the most significant barriers we encounter is language. A lack of a shared language leads to a disconnect even among ourselves. The invisible language of animals has been a subject for exploration currently, yet we still struggle to understand our likeness. The heart of this problem lies within our definition of consciousness. Our inability to explicitly communicate has led our society to presume that animals are devoid of consciousness; the core of what constructs a sentient being. Phenomenology, a theory emphasizing the concepts beyond human perception, tackles the ignorance and narrow scope of the human lens. In “What it’s Like to be a Bat”, Thomas Nagel, a philosopher, delves into our inability to genuinely understand the intricacies of

another's life. He specifically uses the bat because of its extra sense of sonar. While we can imagine what it is like to have sonar, we are still comparing it to the senses we possess that fall vastly short of its reality. The ultimate point of Nagel's article is that we are incapable of understanding how even an individual that shares many similar traits interprets the world. This writing falls in line with phenomenological theories. Phenomenology is a philosophy that prods us and piques our curiosity about the lives of others all while confronting the comfort of our ignorance. It is a certainty that we cannot completely understand another, but this intimate lack of primal communication does not negate another's capability of emotion and sentience. I believe this opens up a common ground between ourselves and every other being, human and non-human, that we are in both a place of attempted empathy and utter ignorance. On this common ground I think growth towards a shared environment and future can be constructed. This is the world I want my art to exist in. My art is meant to speak for the differences, similarities, and the ultimate and undeniable individuality that every organism possesses.

Conclusion

My paintings construct captivating moments that recreate meaningful bonds between humans and animals. Moments that were once common that played a vital role in our evolution and the evolution of many non-human species. In our modern, urban environments people have few chances to engage with nature in general. This disconnects species and ultimately leads us to the grim state that our environment and animal life is subjected to today. My paintings provide a space for people to interact with animals that may not be

observable under normal circumstances. I want to confront the viewers with the power, mystery, fear, and beauty that the animal gaze and form encapsulates to bridge the perceived line between animals and humans.

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